DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 211 202 PS 012 577

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TITLE "Don't Interrupt!": Preschoolers' Entry into Ongoing Conversations.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Second International Congress for the Study of Child Language (Vancouver, British Columbia, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Age Differences; *Classroom Communication; Classroom Observation Techniques; Classroom Research; Cognitive Ability; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; *Sex Differences; *Social Cognition; Sociolinguistics; Verbal Communication
IDENTIFIERS *Conversation; Dyads; *Interruption

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which preschoolers have acquired some of the rules governing politeness when they interrupt conversations. (An interruption was defined as an utterance by a child to two or more people who were already engaged in conversation, and where the topic of the child utterance was unrelated to the ongoing conversational topic.) Eighteen 3- to 5-year-old boys and girls were observed in their classroom while interacting with one another. Observations yielded instances of children's attempts to enter ongoing conversations between child/child, adult/child, and adult/adult pairs. Results indicated that preschoolers rarely used polite strategies (e.g., waiting for acknowledgement) or verbal politeness formulas (e.g., "Excuse me") before interrupting. Adult/child pairs were more frequently interrupted than were adult/adult or child/child pairs. Older children and girls tended to interrupt at a closer distance to those they were interrupting than did younger children and boys. The results are discussed in terms of the development of the sociolinguistic rules and cognitive abilities involved in entering ongoing conversations. (Author/MP)

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ED211202

"Don't interrupt!": Preschoolers' entry into ongoing conversations.

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Observations of natural interactions in a preschool (18 children 3;4 to 5;6) yielded instances of children's attempts to enter ongoing conversations between child-child, adult-child, and adult-adult pairs. In this age range and situation, there was little evidence of polite strategies (e.g. waiting for acknowledgement) or verbal politeness formulas for interruption. Adult-child pairs were more frequently interrupted than adult-adult or child-child pairs. Older children and girls tended to interrupt at a closer distance than did younger children and boys. The results are discussed in terms of the development of the sociolinguistic rules and cognitive abilities involved in entering ongoing conversations.

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PS012577

Paper presented at the Second International Congress for the Study of Child Language, Vancouver, 1981.

We are all frequently faced with the difficult task of bringing up a new topic to one or more people who are already engaged in conversation. We must interrupt, but attempt to do so politely, behaving in ways that follow general rules of politeness such as "don't impose" and "give options to the listeners" (Ervin-Tripp, 1973; Lakoff, 1973). The previously participating members in the conversation have the floor, and to interrupt politely we may approach, wait for acknowledgment, and use a politeness formula (Ferguson, 1976) such as "excuse me" to indicate that we are introducing a new topic rather than simply joining the conversation. Furthermore, for an interruption to be perceived as legitimate, there must be a valid reason for the topic change. Now imagine the following situation: Two people are talking quietly together. A third person approaches them, and says in a loud voice, "You know where I sleep? You know where I sleep? You know where I sleep?" As you may easily guess, this third person is a 3-year-old. In this paper, I will describe some characteristics of interruptions in preschool children and discuss some reasons for the difficulty of interrupting gracefully.

The term "interruption" is applicable to two sorts of conversational events: the breaking into an utterance of one speaker by another and the breaking into an ongoing conversation by a non-participant. It is the first type of interruption--utterance interruption--that has received most attention thus far (see Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974). For a conversation interruption to occur, there are two defining characteristics. The topic must be new and the person introducing the topic must be a nonparticipant. If a nonparticipant arrives and makes a comment on the established topic, this would simply be

"joining the conversation." If a participant introduces a new topic, it is usually marked ("Oh, by the way" or "This is off the subject but") and if not, is perceived as a "nonsequiter," not an interruption.

Researchers who have studied utterance interruptions by adults have noted that they reveal status or dominance relations in a group. For example, in cross-sex pairs, women are interrupted more by men than vice-versa (Bernard, 1968; Willis & Williams, 1976; Zimmerman & West, 1975). In parent-child dyads, Greif (1980) found that fathers interrupted children more than mothers did, and both interrupted girls more than boys. Since status affects utterance interruptions in two-party conversations, we might also expect status to be a factor in conversation interruptions, and everyday experience certainly suggests that there are different constraints on breaking into conversations depending on the status of the participants. Particularly relevant for this study, a conversation interruption has fewer constraints if the conversational participants are in a service role (e.g., one more freely would interrupt two salespeople talking). Constraints also vary according to the topic of the interruption, with the general rule being that more "pressing needs" have priority. Furthermore, an interruption that is based on the need of the addressee is more permissable than one based on the need of the interrupter.[1]

Various aspects of the interrupter's behavior would vary with such constraints: e.g., posture, distance, loudness of voice, length of waiting for acknowledgment before speaking, and politeness phrases used.

Children, of course, are notorious for interrupting. But even preschoolers are in the process of acquiring some relevant conversational skills. They learn how to initiate and join conversations by getting the attention of the addressee(s) (McTear, 1979; Shields, 1978), how to structure what is said so that the addressee can understand what is being said (Keenan & Schieffelin, 1976), and how to get a turn in a conversation (Ervin-Tripp, 1979).

Furthermore, though a polite preschooler may seem to some to be a contradiction in terms, recent work shows that young children are indeed learning some conversational graces. Gleason and Weintraub (1976) documented the explicit instruction that children receive regarding politeness routines, and their non-routine utterances such as requests also show some emerging sensitivity to not impose and give options to the listener. Though preschoolers are more likely to use the less polite direct request forms than indirect requests (Garvey, 1975), the use of indirect forms increase in this age range (Bates, 1976a & b ; Read & Cherry, 1978). In line with children's general sensitivity to age of listener as a determinant of conversational style (Ervin-Tripp, 1977; Sachs & Devin, 1976; Shatz & Gelman, 1973), 4-year-olds in role-play were most polite to dolls representing adults (Andersen, 1977; James, 1978). The familiarity of the listener and the probability that he/she will comply also affect request forms (Weeks, 1979). By school age (7 to 12 years), children use a variety of request forms and are aware of the factors that affect their choice (Mitchell-Kernan & Kernan, 1977; Gordon, Budwig, Strage & Carrell, 1980). Again, we might suppose that some of the factors influencing politeness in requests such as age of addressee would influence the probability and method of conversation interruption.

Another aspect of adult conversational behavior emerges early: sex differences in speech style. Most relevant to the topic at hand, Esposito (1979) found that in cross-sex child dyads, boys were more likely to interrupt utterances than were girls. In interrupting conversations, we might also expect to find evidence of boys' perception of their status as more dominant.

In this study, we collected natural instances of interruptions by preschoolers in the preschool setting, attending to variables such as the age and sex of the interrupting child, the status of those addressed, and the

topics and manner of interrupting. The goal of the study was to determine whether preschoolers are acquiring some of the rules governing politeness in interrupting conversations.

Method

The data reported here consist of 73 observations of interruptions by 18 children (7 boys, ages 3,4 to 5,6 and 11 girls, ages 3,6 to 5,3). The interruption episodes were hand-transcribed during 10 hours of observation, mostly in 1 to 1 1/2 hour blocks. Before the collection of these data, the observer had collected data for about 6 hours in the same preschool class, and the descriptive system used for coding the observations had been developed using the observations made during that time. Furthermore, the preliminary observation period insured that the children were very familiar with the observer and accustomed to the observation situation.

The observer sat or stood at various places in the room, attended to the ongoing conversations and attempted to notice interruptions. An interruption was defined as an utterance by a child to two or more people who were already engaged in conversation, where the topic of the child's utterance was unrelated to the ongoing conversational topic. Obviously, with such a method, many interruptions would take place that the observer would not notice because she was attending elsewhere. However, when she did notice an interruption, she wrote down as much as she could recall about the child's nonverbal behavior, the interrupting utterance, and the reaction. On the same coding sheet, she made checks for the following variables: sex of interrupter, proximity, whether approaching, loudness, and status of people interrupted (adult-child, male-female). We are well aware of the limitations of the on-line observation method: e.g., incompleteness and inability to recall exact wording. However,

we hoped that we would obtain a general picture of the preschoolers' behavior which could lead to other methods of data collection in future research.

Results

The major result of the observations is that we found essentially no politeness routines. Nonverbal signals for attention before actually beginning the interrupting utterance were almost nonexistent. In the 73 interruptions observed, there were two instances of waiting for acknowledgment and one of tapping a teacher on the leg. There were no verbal politeness formulas for interruption in these observations (e.g., "Excuse me"). It might be argued that either a nonverbal signal or politeness formula would make the interruption less disruptive and therefore less noticeable to the observer. Indeed, we do not know that such signals were never used, but we are confident that in this situation for this age group they are very rare.

Table 1. Percentage of interruptions to various addresses

Adult-Child	Adult-Adult	Child-Child
59%	36%	5%

Table 1 shows the percentage of interruptions to various addressees. Since there were no significant differences by sex or age of interrupter, these data are for all children. Most of the interruptions observed were interruptions of adult-child conversations (59%), with the target of the interruption almost always the adult. A significantly smaller percentage ($p > .05$) was addressed to adult-adult conversations (36%). Though it might

appear that the children were differentiating between adult-child and adult-adult dyads in terms of their interruptability, to conclude this we would need to know that there were equal numbers of adult-child and adult-adult conversations to interrupt. This is in all likelihood not the case, and other procedures will be needed to see whether preschoolers view adult-adult and adult-child pairs differently.

A much smaller percentage of interruptions were addressed to child-child pairs (5%). Though this might initially seem surprising, we will see a bit later that the topics of the interruptions were usually bids for help or attention (which would be more reasonably from adults). When a child wishes to interact with or get attention from another child, it may be that quite different strategies from those used with adults are used. Corsaro (1979) studied the strategies used by children 2,10 to 4,10 for gaining access to ongoing child activities in a preschool. He found that children typically joined a group by simply placing themselves in the area (nonverbal entry) and/or producing a variant of the ongoing behavior. Only 7% of the access strategies observed were disruptive (a physical or verbal distruption of the ongoing activity). Since our interruptions would have been "disruptions" in Corsaro's system, the low percentage of child-child interruptions seems compatible with his results. Furthermore, he found that disruptive entry very rarely was successful in gaining the child a place in the activity. It may be that interruptions are more tolerated by adults in the preschool setting than they are by children.

Table 2. Percentage of interruptions that were proximal

	Boys	Girls
Young	48%	80%
Old	72%	90%

Table 2 shows the results for proximity, with proximal meaning within a normal conversational distance. "Younger" is below 4 yrs, 6 mos. Girls interrupted significantly more proximally than did boys ($p > .01$) and older children interrupted significantly more proximally than did younger children ($p > .01$). Thus girls and older children are behaving more politely in their interruptions in terms of this variable. The interruptions were also coded as being at a conversational loudness (for preschool standards) or "yelled." Only 36% were at a conversation loudness and there were no reliable sex or age differences.

Therefore, the most typical conversation interruption would involve a child standing near a teacher-child pair and yelling the conversational initiation utterance. However, when the child was a boy younger than 4,6, it was just as likely that the initiation would be made from far away as near the addressees.

The reasons for the interruptions were classified as follows:

Needs--for action or intervention	E's not sharing, Will you play this with me?
for objects	P, can I have a pencil?
for help	I can't open it.
for permission	Can A sit with me?
for information	Hey P, where do I put this?

Requests for attention--in context	I washed my hands, Look, I got raisins.
out of context	Know what's on TV tonight? Zoom!
	I'm already living in my new house.
Greeting	Hi, D.
Uninterpretable or ambiguous	I don't need that other one.

The largest percentage of interruptions (50%) were of the sort that one would expect interruptions to be--indications of need of some sort--and rather evenly spread out over the various types. However, another 39% of the interruptions were requests for attention. Here there was nothing required of the addressee except to acknowledge and provide a conversational response such as OK, That's good, Right, etc. Such interruptions would almost invariably be perceived as a breach in adult interactions because there is no pressing need, but the fact that so many interruptions are requests for attention will come as no surprise to parents or others who deal with young children.

Why were there so many of these unnecessary (from the adult's point of view) interruptions? One contributing factor may be the preschool context. Interactions are extremely fluid, and though two people were talking together to fit our criterion for an ongoing conversation, the conversational partners do change frequently. Another, and in fact related, factor is the reactions of the teachers to the interruptions. When a child interrupted there was almost always a brief but positive response, whereupon the teacher resumed the earlier interaction. For example, two teachers were talking quietly. A child yelled to them I did it, I did it, I did it. One teacher turned to him and said Very good, S and then resumed her conversation. Recall that for adults, one variable affecting the interruptibility of talkers is whether they are in a service role. Teachers in a preschool presumably view themselves as being there to interact with the children rather than to interact with one another, so that it would not

be seen as appropriate to prevent a child from having access to them. We observed only a few examples of teachers ignoring interruptions or redirecting the child to another teacher, and no occasions where a teacher used the phrase in our title, "Don't interrupt." In contrast, in family interactions, Ervin-Tripp (1979) found examples in which a younger child's attempt to interrupt was ignored by older children or adult-older child pairs.

One relevant question, then, regarding topics of interruption is whether our results are unique to the preschool context. A study carried out by one of my students, Linda Schubert (1978), provides some evidence. She visited mothers of young children, and sat and talked with the mothers, recording any interruptions that happened to occur. Thus the situation was one with more constraints against interruption for the child. Two preschoolers provided 15 interruptions. Of these, 60% were requests for attention rather than expression of needs--an even higher percentage than in our preschool setting.

If it is indeed the case generally that children not only interrupt more than we think they should, without routines to signal politeness, but for topics that we consider inappropriate, then clearly there is considerable development in this aspect of conversational ability between preschool and adulthood. I find this change in interruption behavior interesting because I suspect that there are at least two factors involved in the change: rule learning and changes in cognitive processing constraints.

We will first consider rule learning. There are a number of rules involved in appropriate conversation interruptions. One involves awareness of the turntaking nature of interactions. Turntaking in dyads seems to be relatively well controlled by the age we have observed here. In child-child conversations, utterance interruptions are not frequent (Garvey & Berninger, 1979) and are perhaps even fewer than one finds in adult conversations, where listeners come in early because they have made an incorrect prediction about

the utterance end-point. Getting a turn in a conversation with 3 or more participants is more complex in terms of timing. Another category of conversational rules relevant to interruptions involves attending to the topic of the conversation. Children do show an increase in following the topic with age (Bloom, Rocissano & Hood, 1976; Chapman, Miller, MacKenzie & Bedrosian , 1981). However, throughout the preschool years there remains, even in dyadic interactions, some disconnectedness in topic that is quite atypical of adult-adult speech (Blank & Franklin, 1980). It may be that children sometimes attend to the topic and sometimes do not, and in the situation where they are interrupting an ongoing conversation, they may not be aware that they are initiating a topic change. In short, there are a number of rules to be learned in order to interrupt conversations appropriately, and future studies may reveal where the particular gaps in children's knowledge are.

The second factor that may affect children's ability to interrupt appropriately is a cluster of developmental changes I'll call "changes in cognitive processing constraints." For example, children may interupt because they do not perceive the talking behavior of those they interrupt. Even more importantly, I suspect that problems in children's inhibition of behavior are quite central to the issue here. The child's intent to communicate takes precedence, even when he "knows" it shouldn't. For example, we are in the process of collecting data on interruptions in a different context, where the child is asked to approach two adults who are talking in order to make a request. In one case when so instructed a 3-year-old said to me "I have to wait until they stop talking." This 3-year-old knows something about interrupting, though not everything since he does not know what to do when people do not simply stop talking. His mother and teachers would probably be very pleased. However, would we want to guess that this preschooler would behave differently from the ones we observed here out on the preschool floor, or even when his mother is on the telephone? I think not, because his knowledge might very well be overridden by other factors. I would like to suggest that many

aspects of conversational behavior, not just interruption, will be fully understood only by taking into account general developmental processes as well as conversational rule learning.

In summary, in naturalistic observation in the preschool, we found that preschoolers did not use politeness routines in interrupting conversations. Furthermore, they broke into conversations when there was no "pressing need," for reasons that would be inappropriate in adults. I have suggested that the child's development of appropriate interrupting behavior involves not only learning a number of conversation rules but also changes in the child's processing capacities to permit use of the rules that are known.

Notes

The author wishes to acknowledge the help of Maureen Maio, Linda Schubert, and the staff of the Preschool Laboratory.

[1] This discussion of constraints is not meant to be exhaustive. For example, the non-verbal behavior of talkers also influences how interruptible they are, with closeness and face-to-face stance indicative of "closedness" to a third party (Scheflen, 1972).

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